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U Sam Oeur

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U SAM OEUR is a Cambodian poet who was born in rural Svey Rieng province, near the border with Vietnam. He went to school in Phnom Penh then came to the U.S. where he received a BA in industrial arts from Cal State-Los Angeles and an MFA from Iowa's Writers' Workshop. He returned to Cambodia in 1968.

Sam and I were classmates, neighbors, and friends from '66 through '68, when we were both working on our MFAs. I became fascinated by what he told me of his country and had planned to visit to help Sam translate Cambodian folk literature into English. We corresponded for a year or so before Sam wrote that there was no longer any point in writing, as all the mail was censored. That was the last I heard of Sam until 1984 when Iowa's English Department received a letter from him, through an Australian n.g.o. in Bangkok, requesting a copy of his MFA thesis. Sam had burned his own copy at the beginning of the Pol Pot takeover, knowing it would be used as evidence against him.

Most people had assumed that Sam had been executed during the Pol Pot regime; I had, however, continued to ask questions of those coming out of Cambodia. So we began corresponding again. It was apparent that Sam wanted out of Cambodia, but how could we get him out? I presented his situation to Clark Blaise, Director of the International Writing Program, and after several years of wrangling, Clark was able to find a sponsor for Sam—the Dashiell Hammett-Lillian Hellman Fund for Free Expression. Part of the problem was that Sam did not have a reputation as a writer. If he had had such a reputation, of course, he would have been dead many times over. During the Pol Pot years, for instance, Sam had thrown away his eyeglasses and pretended to be a coolie.

Sam arrived at the Cedar Rapids airport in September of 1992, with a suitcase full of tattered reference books and the clothes on his back. Our wish, back in the late 60s, to work together had taken a rather cruel and circuitous detour. I saw him coming down the escalator at the airport, his hair now white, his hands shaky, but his smile no less beatific than it had been in 1968.

The five poems which follow give you some sense of a before-and-after in the life of U Sam Oeur. "Bung Kriel" is a revision of a poem which was

actually included in Sam's MFA thesis at Iowa. The original was written in 1967. We glimpse the country as it was before the turmoil of the last thirty-five years. I remember Sam's poems from those days—most of them were infused with tranquility. Sam has old friends who have expressed their disappointment that he does not write this same sort of pastoral/classical poetry now. This element is not gone from his work by any means. But in the other four poems, and in most of his recent work, the subject matter dictates a different stance.

The version of "Oath of Allegiance" which appears here is different from the version which appears in a small chapbook entitled *Selections from Sacred Vows,* published in 1993. This current version is more literal and its formal arrangement is much closer to the Khmer original. In the other version, for example, we start with the lines:

> Innocent peasants were tortured every day—
> their heads held underwater,
> fish sauce forced through their nostrils,
> beaten to death by colonial authorities,
> shot or butchered by Khmer Viet Minh.

The Khmer original makes no mention of peasants with their heads held underwater or fish sauce being forced through their nostrils, but, according to Sam, every Cambodian reader who was alive at that time will have those *particular* images etched in his or her mind—they are implied. My point is that we took liberties, on occasion, to make more tangible the scenarios of poems. "Oath" chronicles Sam's going out by himself in 1952, when he was sixteen, and asking the Powers That Be to bring peace to his country and, at the same time, he makes a vow that he will stay in Cambodia until this comes about. Little did he realize that this vow would keep him there through countless nightmares, including hard labor in six different Pol Pot concentration camps.

The poem "Loss of My Twins" is set in 1976 and is from the longest section of the manuscript, which is entitled "In the Concentration Camps." As in many of the poems in this manuscript, there is an introductory narrative section leading into a heightened finale, which, when it is chanted in Khmer, is reminiscent of recitative building to aria. In this poem the aria section is an intimate address to his twin daughters who have just been

murdered. In "Oath," the comparable address is a plea directed to God. Even within "The Elves Conceal My Buffalo and My Son," a longish narrative, there is an "aria" in which the poet calls for his missing son and on all the deities he can muster to help him find his son. "Elves" gives the reader a glimpse of another crucial aspect of U Sam Oeur's personality which helped him to survive life within a holocaust; that is humor.

Finally the poem "The Moaning Nature of Cambodia" deals with the country at this moment, and its stance is more clearly that of a citizen in exile. It addresses the fact that the country is being sold off to outside interests and it is the leaders who are doing the selling out, including Prince Sihanouk. The last stanza's mention of a "master architect" harks back to the golden age of the Angkor era, when certain architects were considered of very high rank, just below the royal family, and the implication is that such an "architect" could help re-establish a new golden age of Khmer culture, in which justice would once again be part of the system.

Bung Kriel (The Lake Where Cranes Mate)

for Ginny Duncan

The paddy fields stretch beyond the horizon.
Where water glitters, I can see palm trees dance.
Where egrets and herons flap after fishes
water buffaloes charge each other, grunting like giants.

The losers spatter water like paddle boats going upstream.
While the bull-buffalo is courting its mate
a young bull quickly mounts her—
the old bull charges and butts him away.

In the air,
the birds dive out of the sun.
Dragonflies quickly fold their wings and fall,
and grasshoppers crouch in the grass.